

Fruits in the Garden
Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7
February 3, 2008
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One of my favorite Far Side cartoons shows this peaceful landscape setting with a shady tree and a grazing deer. And in the middle of this serene meadow is a giant jar with the label "Humans" on it. The jar is broken open, and in the background, there are a few naked people running around. And you see a voice from the cloud above saying, "Uh-oh."

Yes, uh-oh. You have to wonder if God was thinking that after the events of today's passage. God creates this wonderful idyllic paradise full of butterflies and hummingbirds and cute little bunnies, and then humans come along and build casinos and film reality TV shows and mess the whole place up.

Before we try to figure out what in the world is going on here, it might help us first to determine what isn't happening. This story has served as the foundation for a lot of our understanding of our human condition and our relationship with God. It's often ominously called "The Fall," and it gave birth to the term "Original Sin," the idea that because of what Adam and Eve did, we are all born as sinners in need of repentance.

I don't quite buy that. First of all, the terms "the fall" and "original sin" are nowhere to be found in scripture. Second, it's hard for me to look at a newborn baby or my three-year-old daughter and think, "There's a sinner." Now, I believe we all have within us the propensity to sin. And I know all of us, at some point in our lives, will commit a sin. But to doom us from the outset because of what Adam and Eve did in the garden feels too fatalistic. It's a bit of the "devil made me do it" mentality. Don't blame me for my sin, blame Adam and Eve. They started it! I believe we do all have the propensity to sin within us, but we also have the propensity to do good, and leaning too heavily on the concept of Original Sin distorts that balance for me.

Another important point I want to make is one that I make often in relation to the Bible, especially the creation story in Genesis. Well-intentioned people on all sides of the religious spectrum have tried to use this story to prove their religious theories and hypotheses. Others question the Bible's reliability and criticize it by asking questions like, "Where are the dinosaurs?" and "Did Adam have a belly button?"

I believe both sides are asking the Bible to do something it wasn't created to do. The Bible wasn't written as a scientific textbook. It wasn't written as a theological treatise. It was written as a story, a story about God and God's creation and the development of that relationship. To ask the Bible to explain more than that distorts its true purpose.

So if the Bible was written to tell us about God, what does this story have to say to us? God creates man and puts him in the garden to work it and take care of it. That's a bit distressing to those of us without green thumbs, but I trust that, unlike me, Adam could tell the difference between a daisy and a dandelion and knew what he was doing.

Or maybe he didn't, because right after that God creates Eve as Adam's helper. The original Hebrew words literally translates as "someone to tell Adam what gets mowed over and what gets left alone." And Genesis tells us that the man and his wife were naked, and they felt no shame.

Enter the serpent. What do we know about this character? First of all, God made it. Second, the serpent was more crafty or cunning than any of the other creatures. Notice that he never calls God a liar or directly contradicts what God said. Everything the serpent said was kind of true. Instead of forcing Adam and Eve to sin, he does what most temptation does: he plants a seed, and lets it grow within the person.

That's what we know. Now notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say the serpent was evil, and it doesn't say the serpent was Satan. As early as the New Testament, those connections will begin to get made, but if we take the text at face value, we can't leap to that conclusion. Primarily, the serpent is a plot device used to move the story along. Someone or something had to come to Eve. It just as easily could have been a hippopotamus or a tse-tse fly. In ancient history, the serpent was viewed as possessing mystical wisdom, which could help explain why the author chose it. Here. But other than what the text tells us, we can only speculate.

The serpent asks for clarification of God's statement to Adam and Eve. He starts off with, "Did God really say...?" That is a loaded question. When I hear the voice in my head start a question that way, I know I'm in trouble. "Did your mom really say no cookies before dinner? Maybe. But she didn't say anything about eating a part of a cookie. Or a hunk of cookie dough. Or a scoop of cookie dough ice cream. And ice cream has milk in it, and milk is good for you! You'll be doing your mom a favor!" And so goes the temptation, planting seeds in us that grow into doubts and rationalizations and acts of disobedience.

Adam and Eve disobey, but you can understand their motivations. If God loved them, why the prohibition? God created this beautiful setting for them and gave them dominion and use over the entire garden except for one specific tree, which is called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why God would create this tree and then tell Adam and Eve to stay away from it?

One thought is that the tree was bad, but I don't believe God would create something bad. In fact, everything God creates during this story is called "good." Another thought is that God put it there to test Adam and Eve, but that conclusion seems too simplistic. There's a third explanation that makes the most sense to me.

Driving is a good thing. I like driving. I'm glad to be able to get places in my car. But driving is not good for a five-year-old. Flying is an amazing luxury. What a privilege to be able to fly a plane hundreds of miles in a short span of time. But when I go to the airport, they won't let me fly the plane. Only the trained pilots can do that.

Here's a more serious example: in our first scripture today, Satan tempts Jesus by offering him the ability to rule over all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus will only bow down and worship him. Now, Jesus ruling over all the kingdoms of the world isn't necessarily a bad thing, and will eventually happen, but not at this time and not this way.

I believe God intended for Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil when they were ready for it. I believe God wanted Adam and Eve to grow and mature and learn about life in order to be able to handle the knowledge the tree offered. But Adam and Eve couldn't wait, didn't listen, and gave in to temptation.

God didn't say they could never eat from the tree; only that they couldn't at this time. I believe there would be a time, as Adam and Eve matured, that they would be ready for the knowledge the tree would provide, and then God would give them that

privilege. But instead of waiting for God's time, Adam and Eve took matters into their own hands and tried to force God's hand.

Notice the result of their transgression: they realize their nakedness and are so ashamed of it they make some clothes to cover themselves. Yes, it's the world's first cover-up, and it sets the stage for humanity's continual transgressions against God, and then our feeble attempts to cover them up.

In my mind, that is the greatest sin here. It's not the eating of the fruit. It's not the disobedience. It's the failure of Adam and Eve to accept responsibility for what they had done. Instead of owning up, the cover up. They don't want to have to face the consequences for what they have done.

A city employee in Lodi, Calif., sued the city for damages after a dump truck backed into his parked car. The man says that because the city's vehicle damaged his private vehicle, the city owes him \$3600. The catch? The man who owned the car was driving the dump truck. He backed into his own car, and now wants the city to pay him.

Do you wonder what future generations are going to think about us when their archaeologists find McDonald's coffee cups with the warning, "Caution: contents may be hot"? What kind of idiots were these people? But it was a person who sued McDonald's when she spilled coffee on herself that led to the necessity for the warning.

If they were alive today, they would be filing lawsuits against the serpent. Why? Because then they could blame somebody else for something they did wrong. I believe failure to take responsibility for our actions is one of the worst sins we can commit, because it not only denies the truth about what we have done, it usually shifts the blame to someone else. Adam and Eve made me do it!

We are about to enter the season of Lent, which is a time of self-reflection and introspection, and time to acknowledge our human condition and the things we do and say that separate from God. By doing this, we prepare ourselves to truly appreciate and receive the joy of Easter, the gift of forgiveness and new life offered by Christ. Lent will also end in a garden, not Eden, but Gethsemane, where Jesus will say, "God, not my will, but your will be done." And then he'll be crucified on a tree. May Lent be a time of taking responsibility for all we've done and left undone, and then accepting that Jesus Christ died so that we might know God's forgiveness.